From the director's democracy to direct democracy

A short handbook for a post-parliamentary project

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1. Foreword

We live in a time of excessive centralisation of political and economic power. In European Union countries, half of all these countries' lawmaking takes place in Brussels. A broad and coherent scale of institutions such as the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund are having more say over how people all over the world organise their lives. The trend of centralisation of politics on a worldwide level goes hand in hand with increasing monopolisation processes in the economy. Fusion between industrial conglomerates is the order of the day. A corporation such as General Electric has more capital than the collective capital of the poorest third-world countries!

Neo-liberal politicians gladly praise the sacred market and promise the populations of the world heaven on earth, but this 'promised land' seems reserved for fewer and fewer people.

De-democratisation

Through these developments, the word 'democracy' has been stripped down to 'the people's right to choose their own government' (Prisma dictionary). This shabby view of democracy manifests itself in the constantly reoccurring election circuses where it's becoming more difficult to convince people that their vote reflects a real choice. The ever-increasing 'de-democratisation' of social decision-making processes leads constantly to conflict, not only between those who make the decisions and those on whose behalf decisions are made, but also within both groups. In order to be able to continue this de-democratisation, the politicians play a conscious game of 'divide and conquer'. Divisions among ethnic groups and social classes, for example, are carefully cultivated and these divisions are used to cover up fundamental inequalities of rights and opportunities, and to play off the different groups against each other.

At the same time, every form of social unrest that germinates gets channelled into so-called 'opposition parties' and 'Non-Governmental Organisations'. In exchange for a place at the table of the powers-that-be, they keep society's malcontents at home on the sofa, in front of the television.

The attentive reader will have understood it already: the author of this brochure is saying that within narrow parliamentary channels, it is impossible to bring about real political change.

On our way to a post-parliamentary project!

Parliamentary democracy is a capitalist discovery, which gives form and sustenance to the elite and to hierarchies, thereby justifying inequality. The parliamentary puppet show, with its 'professional politicians', doesn't involve people in decision-making but instead pacifies and neutralises them. Elections and other 'moments of democratic participation' are nothing more than folklore that gives parliamentary capitalism the appearance of legitimacy. Politicians, together with their loyal mass media, do their best to try to convince us that there is something worth voting for, but this is exaggerated, to put it mildly. The choice between candidates only represents a difference in style. Parliamentary channels offer only a narrow margin of possibility for change. Stick your neck out and get your head cut off.

We have seen enough of parliamentary democracy; we do not need any more time to determine that it is a fraud. There is no excuse for the enormous and ever-increasing gap between rich and poor and between the North and South. There is no excuse for the continued waging of war, in our name, in countries where the population already has little or nothing to eat. It's high time for a post-parliamentary project, a project that not only fights parliamentary-capitalist power relations, but at the same time brings a just and workable alternative into being. The good news is that an alternative does exist: direct democracy. The pursuit of direct democracy is a struggle for radical democratisation of all decision-making processes in society. The intention of this booklet is to show that direct democracy is not a new ideology where you have to first convince the masses and then you can seize the power; it is not an unrealistic utopia. Direct democracy is a concrete way of achieving horizontal organisation in the here-and-now, from the local level to the global level.

2. What is direct democracy?

When we speak of direct democracy we speak of equality between individuals as the basis of the organisation of society. With direct democracy there is talk of a fundamentally different way of organising than the present parliamentary capitalist practice. Bringing direct democracy into practice would mean radically changing the system of social inequality that is currently legitimated and laid down by laws and regulations. The direct-democratic ideal directly opposes the system of hierarchy that is current social norm. A direct-democratic society rejects all that which gives rise to hierarchy, whether formal or informal, such as sexism, racism, nationalism, capitalism and imperialism. An end should also come to the ridiculous idea that is propagated by bosses, that we have been put on this earth to compete with each other. Cooperation should be propagated instead. The door to a more just world opens when hierarchy and competition are rejected, and equality and cooperation become guiding principles in our lives.

Direct democracy is not just a system that can be used to organise society; it can be used when making decisions on a small scale as well as on a larger scale. It is also a way of stimulating the moulding of ideas and active participation in decision-making processes. In a parliamentary democracy, people are not asked for their ideas, but are asked to either accept or reject ideas already prepared by so-called 'experts'. In that respect, direct democracy is radically different. In a direct democracy, the assumption is that people can decide for themselves what is best for them. People don't need 'specialists', such as politicians, managers, or trade union bosses, to decide on their behalf what they need on the work floor and in their neighbourhoods. With direct democracy, people take control of their own futures, and those affected by decisions are the ones making those decisions.

Direct democracy can be applied on the work floor just as well as in your local neighbourhood. In parliamentary democracy, democratic decision making is seriously lacking on the work floor. In a direct-democratic society, the organisation of a company takes place in a meeting that is open to all workers. This meeting decides, for example, about working conditions and production targets. During the meeting, people who have revocable mandates are chosen , to fulfil coordinating functions in the factory, and also to take care of external contact with other people and organisations. In local neighbourhoods, issues that affect residents can be dealt with in comparable direct-democratic meetings of those concerned.

In a direct-democratic society, the different direct-democratic organisations (and that definitely doesn't just mean 'productive' organisations such as companies)

will cooperate on a regional level via federations. In these federations, which are often organised around a particular theme, representatives coordinate the activities of each other's organisations.

What is stated here is of course a very concise summary of direct-democratic thinking, but the intention is not to lay down the law, as an authoritarian ideology would, but instead to leave the filling-in of the content to those people concerned.

The political framework above leaves you able to go in many directions, and that is exactly what it's all about; a world of many different worlds is possible. Direct democracy is indeed the best guarantee that diversity will not be choked by straightjackets like nationalism, capitalism and state communism.

3. Criteria for a democratic organisational structure

A direct-democratic society won't happen by itself, but will have to be organised. This can happen in your neighbourhood, in the city, at school and on the work floor. It's important to create alternative organisations in all the important social areas. We will have to do this ourselves, because the state is never going to do it for us. The state will only make life difficult for people who want to take their lives into their own hands, and who want to organise ourselves in an anti-authoritarian way. In addition to bringing an anti-authoritarian alternative into practice, direct-democratic organisations will have to organise to resist state repression.

Although each situation and every goal set will need tailor-made practices, there are a number of conditions that each direct-democratic organisation needs to fulfil in order to be able to function properly.

The American feminist, Jo Freeman, wrote the pamphlet 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' in 1971. In this pamphlet, she convincingly challenged the informal structures and hierarchies of the American feminist movement at the time. Basically, the pamphlet stated that a direct-democratic organisation needs a clear formal structure, otherwise friendship cliques and 'hidden' hierarchies become rampant. Her criticisms are still relevant after thirty years; informality and 'hidden' hierarchies are common in many activist groups, which stands in contrast to their stated anti-authoritarian ideas. Jo Freeman's pamphlet contained the following list of criteria for a (direct) democratic organisational structure:

1) Delegate specific responsibilities to specific individuals, for specific tasks, using democratic procedures. When everyone knows who is responsible for which specific tasks, everyone knows whom to consult about concerns.

2) At all times, those to whom tasks have been delegated are accountable to the group that has delegated the task to them.

3) Distribute tasks among as many people as is reasonably possible and workable. This prevents people's monopolising power and requires those in positions of authority to consult with many others in the process of exercising it. It also gives many people the opportunity to have responsibility for specific tasks and thereby to learn different skills.

4) Rotate tasks among individuals. Responsibilities that are held too long by one person come to be seen as that person's 'property' and are not easily relinquished or brought back to group control. On the other hand, if tasks are rotated too

frequently, this can bring the continuity of the group in danger. For some tasks, the individual needs the time to learn the job well and to acquire the sense of satisfaction of doing a good job.

5) Allocate tasks along rational criteria. Selecting someone for a position because the group likes her or giving her hard work because she is disliked serves neither the group nor the person chosen, in the long run. Ability, interest and responsibility have got to be the major concerns in such a selection. People should be given an opportunity to learn expertise they do not have, but this is best done via a good transfer of skills rather than the 'sink or swim' method, which can work in a demoralising way.

6) Diffuse information to everyone as frequently as possible. Information is power. The more one knows about how things work and what is happening, the more politically effective one can be.

7) Ensure that there is equal access to resources needed by the group. Access to a computer or to a certain tool can determine someone's opportunities within the group, just as skills and information are also resources.

When these principles are applied, the chance is good that, no matter which specific organisation structure is finally chosen, the whole group itself has power rather than individuals or an informal elite. The group of people who take on tasks is open, varied and temporary. They shouldn't be able to abuse their given power, as the group always has the last word.

4. Direct-democratic organisational forms

In addition to being a system that can be used to organise society, direct democracy can be used to make decisions on a small scale as well as on a larger scale. No two situations are the same, and there are many forms that direct democracy can take. The specific form of self-organisation that a group chooses is largely determined by the group's specific goal. Sometimes the goal is something short-term, like organising a one-time action. Sometimes the intention is to work on something for a longer time, as within a campaign. It can also be a continuing goal, such as to organise a research group, a free place, or lasting political cooperation within a collective or regional federation.

It's important to find out which organisational form will work best for you, and which will give you the most chance of realising your goal. Within the movement for direct democracy, many organisational forms have developed over the course of time, and here we will review the most important ones. These should not be seen as being the 'be all and end all'. There are many different nuances and possible variations.

It goes without saying that the criteria for a democratic organisational structure, which we have already dealt with, should always be applied to each type of organisation.

Affinity groups

Affinity means 'kinship' or 'solidarity'. Affinity groups exist in all shapes and sizes, but as a rule they manifest temporary or spontaneous cooperation that has a specific and limited goal. The goal can be organising an action, for example, or carrying out specific supportive tasks during an action or demonstration. The affinity group operates as a team and all the members of the group look out for each other. In other words, the 'solidarity' is usually based on the joint pursuit of a goal, but can also be based on having similar ideas about which methods to use. An affinity group can operate in conjunction with the organisers of a demo or action, but can also operate autonomously (independently and on its own initiative) just as well.

There are generally between three and twenty members within each affinity group. The group often consists of people who already knew each other and decided to take part in a demonstration or action as a group, but that doesn't always have to be the case. Groups can also be spontaneously formed to achieve a certain goal.

Supporting affinity groups

-First aid group - This is a group of people who operate as a medical team for the participants in demonstrations or actions.

-Legal observers group - This clearly recognisable group observes and reports police behaviour during an action or demonstration. People are needed who can keep an eye on developments from a distance, especially when tensions rise, and who take note of what happens and which officers overstep the mark.

-Prisoner support group - This group works mostly behind the screens, gathers all information about those who have been arrested and the situation in which the arrests took place. The prisoner support group works closely together with the legal observers group, serves as an info-point for activists, arranges contact with lawyers, and ensures good communication between the different people concerned and with the outside world.

-Route group - During a demonstration, it is a good idea to have a team that ensures that everyone walks the same route.

-Protection group - For non-legal actions, it can be good to have a group of people who are specifically concerned with protecting the participating activists. This can mean forming a physical wall, for example, between the activists and the police, or trying to prevent arrests.

Autonomous affinity groups

-Propaganda group - During large demonstrations, and other occasions where a lot of people are present, it is good to let your own anti-authoritarian voice be heard. This can be done by handing out flyers, carrying banners etc. In practice, demonstrations are often organised by authoritarian groups, which means that it's very important to make a visible anti-authoritarian stance.

-Action group - Demonstrations often offer good protection in order to be able to carry out direct action. This can be anything from putting up posters to 'proletarian shopping'. Take care that you don't put anybody else in danger with your action.

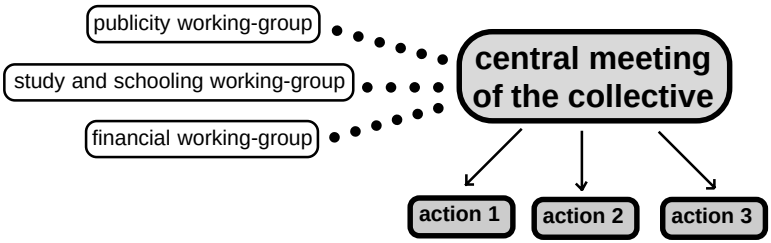
Cooperation between affinity groups

Cooperation between different affinity groups has increased rapidly in the past few years, especially within the global justice movement. During big protests that last a number of days, thousands of people often come together to find ways to make direct-democratic decisions. This necessity has become more important as authoritarian organisations have tried to stamp their mark on the protests. A fairly good way of trying to get all the different groups on the same page is to hold coordination meetings. Delegates from the different affinity groups take part in the meetings. These coordination meetings are known as Spokes Councils.

Collectives

A collective is a permanent organisation. In a collective (the word actually says it all), togetherness occupies an important space. By togetherness we understand the gathering of means, strengths and thoughts. The bringing together of resources within one organisational framework is at least as important as the joint undertaking of activities and reaching a shared goal. As a result of this, the collective is a permanent organisational form that, in contrast with the affinity group, has a continuing goal, such as putting out a magazine or keeping a business going. Because of their permanence, collectives usually have a formal organisational structure. A long-term organisation also demands necessary fixed tasks. In order to avoid discussing the same things over and over again, fixed tasks are often divided up among the individuals of the collective. Those who carry out these tasks should stick to their mandates (which should include room to manoeuvre) as established in the meeting. The organisational makeup of the collective is determined by the number of people involved, the nature of the collective's activities and the circumstances that the collective must operate in. Therefore, the organisational structure is tailor-made according to the criteria for a democratic organisational structure, as discussed in chapter 3. Two of the most common organisational frameworks are the centralised and decentralised collectives.

Flowchart of a Centralised Collective



The centralised collective

The type of collective in which all discussion and decision-making takes place in a plenary meeting (general assembly), in which all members of the collective take part, is known as a centralised collective. This can work fine when the collective has a small number of members and limited activities, as you can see on the chart above. The huge advantage of this structure is that all members of the collective are involved in all facets of organising. It can be handy to set up working groups within this structure that can carry out special tasks and to prepare for the plenary meeting.

The decentralised collective

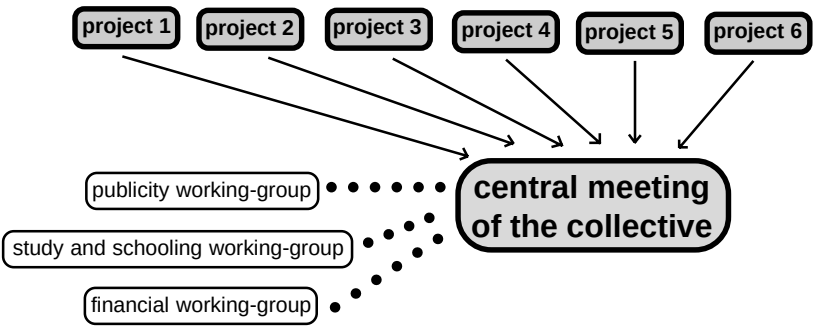
When a collective grows and the number of projects and people increases, it is often difficult to organise everything during plenary meetings. Not only does this lead to long meetings, it is also absurd and inefficient. Why should everyone have to discuss every little detail?

Contrary to what many believe, direct democracy doesn't mean that everyone *must* talk about everything, but that everyone *can* discuss and decide on the issues that concern him or her. It is not necessary for each person to be physically present at every meeting; furthermore, plenary meetings in which everyone is present are no guarantee of democratic decision-making. In direct democracy, the most important factors are the accessibility and transparency of a workable decision-making process.

Once you achieve a workable organisational structure, you should continue to work from it, improving it when necessary. If you don't, then the organisation can disintegrate and the collective's members can become frustrated. This can bring the existence of the collective in danger. Therefore, the best way for a more complex direct-democratic organisation to discuss and decide issues is to formally decentralise the decision-making process.

One way to decentralise the decision-making process within the collective is to form project groups, based around specific, concrete tasks such as producing a magazine, running a shop, organising actions etc. It is important that the individual groups' tasks are clear and defined, so that everyone knows who does what and when.

Flowchart of a Decentralised Centralised Collective



The coordination

The decentralisation of the organisation structure will succeed or fail depending on the standard of coordination between the different parts of the collective. When you decentralise, but fail to coordinate, the collective will fall apart. Keeping a collective together, especially if the organisation grows, is quite a job in itself.

The project groups meet separately and delegate one or more person(s) to go to the coordination meeting a number of times, to represent the project. (The representative must attend 'a number of times', because the coordination group cannot function without continuity.)

During the coordination meeting, all the delegates from the different projects come together. They discuss how their projects are going and synchronise activities.

To increase decisiveness, the coordination meeting could be given the capacity to make decisions there and then. Important and controversial points should, however, always be relayed back to the projects before a decision can be made. If the coordination group still doesn't reach a decision after that, then a plenary meeting can always be called.

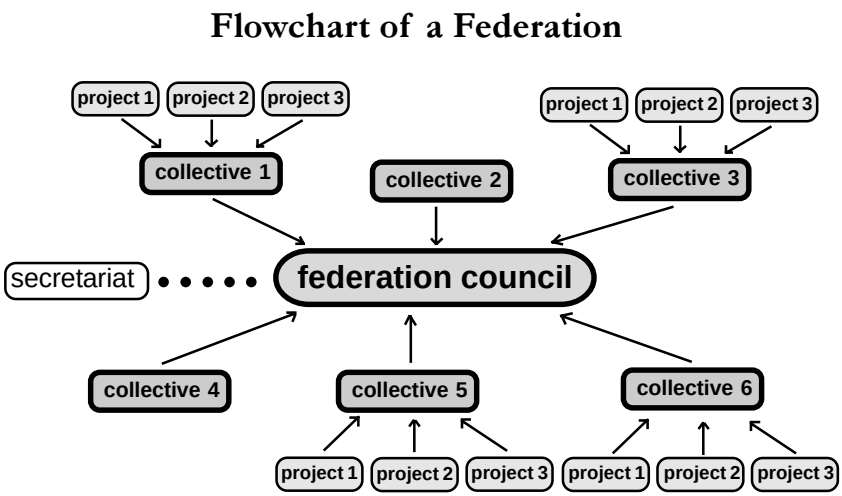
Apart from the different independently operating projects, which are all represented at the coordination meeting, joint working groups can be set up (see flowchart). These can be general working groups for long-term tasks that are important to all projects, or temporary working groups for specific occasions.

The working groups are subject to the same method of decision making as the project groups and coordination meetings are.

Federations

A federation is a formal cooperation that unites individual organisations. Not all federations are made up of (only) direct-democratic organisations. Most already existing federations unite hierarchical organisations. However, expressly direct-democratic federations exist as well. Many western countries, for example, have federations that unite anarchist organisations. A federation seems to be a good place to coordinate the activities of different direct-democratic organisations (the federation members). Just like a collective, a federation is a long-term organisation. Groups join federations for different reasons. Organisations often share a specific goal, for example 'representing worker's interests' or 'protection of the environment'. Sometimes ideological principles form the basis of cooperation, even though in practice the individual organisations are busy doing

different things. Almost all federations work with a secretariat that supports the federation. This flowchart gives an idea of how a federation can be constructed:



Collectives 1, 3, 5 and 6 are decentralised collectives and each one consists of three projects. Collectives 2 and 4 are centralised collectives. Each collective sends a delegate to the federation council, where they all coordinate their activities. However, at no time does a collective lose its autonomy.

Coalitions

Apart from formal organisational forms, the movement for direct democracy makes use of informal methods of cooperation. This can take place on a local as well as a regional level in the form of innumerable groups that prepare and carry out (often short-term) actions. On a regional level this would usually take the form of coalitions (also known as platforms) and networks. Coalitions and networks have a lot of similarities. Not only are both less formal than federations, but they are also less durable in character, and their level of political unity is often limited to specific issues. There are, however, a number of differences between coalitions and networks.

A coalition is set up as organisational framework in which different organisations, and sometimes different individuals, can synchronise their activities, and in so doing increase their chances of reaching their common goals. Their basis for cooperation usually takes the form of a manifesto. The manifesto contains analyses of the issues and a description of the goals. The formal organisational structure is negligible, so a flowchart is not needed. Apart from coalition meetings, there is

usually a supporting secretariat. Organisations and individuals can join a coalition very easily. All they have to do is endorse the manifesto. There are rarely any other obligations for members of the coalition.

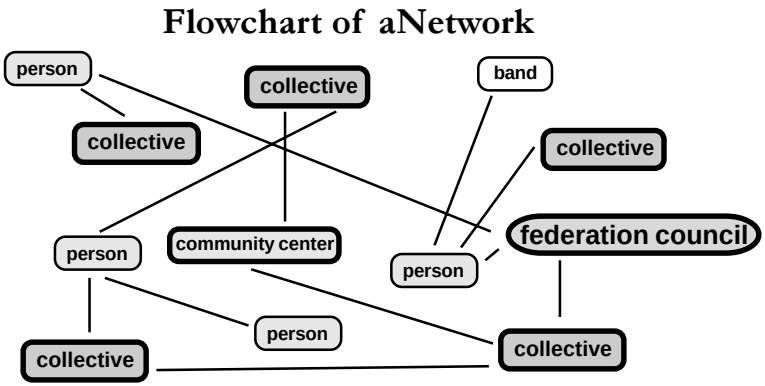
Networks

Networks, even more than coalitions, are based on informality. Most networks have a more general goal than the average coalition. A network is an easily accessible and informal communication framework, where experiences can be exchanged and the participants can support each other's activities.

A good example of a network is the People's Global Action (PGA) network (1), which has brought countless organisations and individuals together in the last few years without even having an office or a spokesperson. The organisations and individuals that have come together through PGA often carry out their activities thousands of kilometres away from one another. The characteristics that unify PGA are its five political hallmarks, its manifesto, its organisational principles, e-mail lists, and a conference now and again.

People within a network rarely call themselves members, but rather participants. There are countless networks of an anarchist character. The Internet has hugely increased the role of networks in modern social movements.

The global justice movement owes a large part of its existence to networks. Even so, these networks shouldn't be seen as a replacement or an alternative for more formal structures such as federations, but should be seen as a valuable addition to such formal organisations. They offer a cross-border organisational frame in which the social movements can coordinate their activities without being in each other's faces. On the contrary, the anonymity of the Internet gives participants in networks the idea that their own autonomy is guaranteed.



Common problems within horizontal organisations

Every method of organising has its own problems and restrictions. There is no ideal way to organise. Even direct-democratic organisations struggle with internal problems. For example, these problems can be organisational or content-based, and problems can overlap, which makes it even more confusing. Conflicts and differences of opinion, which are direct results of the diversity inherent within the movement for direct democracy, are too often seen as problems rather than dealt with constructively.

Making good decisions is paramount to the sustainability of every form of collaboration. A decision is good when the content is clear, when everyone agrees, when it's determined how the idea will be put into practice, and when it's clear how the implementation will be monitored. If one (or more) of these conditions is not fulfilled, it could easily undermine the trust between the group's members and the group's capacity for action. Vagueness in the decision-making process can also be a reason why certain points keep making their way back onto the agenda. The importance of good decision making is something that should not be underestimated; we will discuss the topic further in chapter 5.

Each group that is serious about achieving something would do well to ensure that the tasks are clearly shared. A common mistake is making a decision before thinking about what's needed to implement the decision. When responsibility for carrying out a decision is not clearly delegated to specific people but to the group as a whole, often *nobody* takes initiative because everybody trusts that somebody else will do it. Of course there are tasks that everyone is responsible for, but in most cases it's sensible to divide the tasks based on rational criteria (see chapter 3) among the group members.

Within direct-democratic groups, there are no bosses who dish out orders. There is (mostly) no punishment system, such as being sacked, that will guarantee thorough implementation of tasks. Therefore, cooperation depends largely on the initiative of the members of the group. Failure to stick to agreements and failure to take responsibility sabotages cooperation within the group, and reduces the chances of reaching the desired goal.

Sometimes it seems as though there are more outspoken characters and crazy ideas in direct-democratic groups than anywhere else. This makes sense, as there is more possibility to be oneself in a direct-democratic environment than out in the 'big bad world'. Working and living together on an equal level, however, doesn't happen on its own. Diversity demands conscious and patient behaviour; this isn't always easy, especially with so much constant pressure from the outside world on

you and your group. For this and other reasons, clashes between various characters and ideas inevitably take place. The trick is not to suppress and deny these conflicts, but to give them a place within the organisation, in such a way that these conflicts help to strengthen the group, and finally help to achieve the goal you set out to realise in the first place.

Footnote: (1) People's Global Action website: http://www.agp.org

5. The meetings

The most important spaces for communication within direct-democratic organisations are the meetings. There the following takes place: discussion, organisation and decision making. There are various direct-democratic ways of meeting. The activist group Food Not Bombs, for example, has introduced a method that can help groups to meet smoothly, effectively and satisfactorily. The facilitator and minute-taker have especially important roles.

The facilitator

The facilitator (also known as moderator or chairperson) has an active, guiding role. She or he ensures a clear structure for the meeting by arranging the agenda points in a logical order and making sure that the meeting sticks to these points. The facilitator ensures that each point is introduced properly, and that as many people as possible take active roles in the decision-making process by asking each person's opinion and the arguments behind it. She or he takes care that the discussions take place in a constructive manner, that each person is allowed to say his or her piece, and that members listen to each other and take each other seriously.

The facilitator guides the meeting to a decision. This process starts with thorough discussion of the agenda points, and requires intervention to stop side conversations, talking in circles, and digression. In order to work towards reaching a good decision or conclusion, the facilitator has to keep neutral in the discussion, has to listen to everyone's ideas, objections and arguments and frequently summarises the discussion up to that point.

Making good decisions is a skill and everyone's constructive input is necessary. The facilitator guides the decision-making process to strong results, by formulating a clear conclusion after each agenda point has been discussed and saying when (in her opinion) consensus has been reached or is in reach. The last moment in the decision-making process is when the facilitator asks whether there is consensus regarding the conclusion or decision. The facilitator makes sure that the minute-taker notes this correctly, so that there is no chance of confusion later on about what decision has been made, and about who is going to carry out the required tasks.

The minute-taker

The minute-taker's role in the meeting is equally as important as that of the facilitator. The minute-taker listens closely to the arguments and writes them

down, as well as the decisions made. Good and complete minutes avoid misunderstanding. It's important to take minutes in such a way that the reader gets a complete picture of the discussion, the arguments exchanged and the decision taken. It's important to write down who precisely is going to carry out which task(s).

Small tasks

Depending on the makeup of the group, it can be handy to assign people small but important tasks that will help the meeting run more smoothly. For example: it's advantageous for groups to have someone who phones around the day before the meeting to remind all the participants that the meeting will take place. This can help when attendance at meetings tends to be low. For larger meetings, it can be useful to have a host to direct people, someone to receive the latecomers and to quickly update them on what's already taken place so as to cause as little disturbance as possible. Another role is that of the timekeeper. Often it's necessary to stick to a strict timeframe, so that at the end of the meeting you don't still have half an agenda to discuss.

In difficult and heated meetings, it can be handy for one person to take note of the atmosphere. This person's task is to make sure that things stay relaxed, that everyone gets to speak, that nobody talks for too long, and that everyone's still awake. Normally these would be the facilitator's tasks, but if the meetings are really big, then the facilitator will be busy enough keeping the discussion on track.

The consensus meeting method

Below, you will see a flowchart of the consensus meeting method. This method structures the meeting in such as way that not only does the meeting flow, but produces clear results. This is a reproduction of the formal consensus method used by Food Not Bombs, which actually refers to a long tradition in Western direct-democratic movements. Sometimes the method will need to be adjusted to suit your specific situation and wishes of the group. There are other variations of this, and it can also be used in combination with other methods of holding meetings. Particularly in large assemblies this can include methods in which the meeting strives for consensus but actually ratifies decisions by voting (usually by overwhelming majority).

In the consensus meeting method, the group chooses the facilitator and minute-taker at the start of the meeting. Then, after a round of proposals, the agenda is decided upon.

Each point is then explained, and people get the opportunity to ask questions to clear up any confusion about the agenda point and proposals.

If an agenda point is not explained well or is unclear, then reaching a good conclusion and decision is already impossible before discussion has even started.

Step 1: when an agenda point doesn't cause much discussion, then consensus can sometimes already be achieved after the first discussion.
Step 2: when there are objections, probably more discussion and/or clarification is necessary. In order to avoid discussing all objections at the same time, a list can be made of the objections. These can then be grouped according to the type of objection.
Step 3: each group of objections is considered one by one. For each objection you try to reach a satisfying solution which shows consideration for the objection. Then you try again to see if there's consensus.
Step 4: if that's not the case, then the point is obviously so sensitive that more discussion is necessary. You then note the remaining objections and ask the objectors for more clarification. Then you ask what would remove the objection. You do this for each individual objection.

There are now five possibilities:

- There is consensus: **the proposal is accepted**
- There is consensus: **the proposal is rejected**
- There is no complete consensus, but **there is unanimity** because the remaining objector 'stands aside' so as not to block the proposal
- People who definitely do not want the proposal to go through **block consensus**
- A **working group is set up** which tries to find a solution

Have a look at the flowchart of the consensus meeting method on the next page.

Meeting starts

choose facilitator and minute-taker
round of proposals
welcome & determine agenda

Then per agenda point

Explanation

explain procedure
explain proposal/agenda point
questions about procedure, proposal or agenda point

Step 1
Open discussion

groupdiscussion
first attempt at consensus

Step 2
Identify objections

make a list of objections
group objections together

Step 3
Answer objections

answer objections
second attempt at consensus

Step 4
Answer rest of objections

name rest of objections
ask for clarification from rest of objectors
discuss rest of objections, one at the time
third attempt at consensus

CONSENSUS
the proposal is accepted or rejected

Alternative options

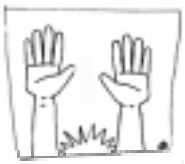
Form special working group
Stand aside
Blocking consensus

Hand signals

In meetings, it can be helpful to use hand gestures to communicate. By using hand signals, people can participate without having to interrupt the conversation, which usually makes the decision-making process easier. Below you can find some of the most important hand signals.

Pointed index finger

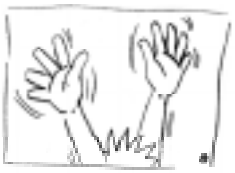
This means that you have a question or remark and that you would like to let the facilitator know that you want to speak. If a lot of people stick up their index fingers at once, then the facilitator (or somebody who assists her) can make a speakers list.



Two hands held in the air

You want to directly react to something the last speaker said. This gives you priority over the people who raise their hands and who might possibly change the subject with their remarks.

Waving with both hands ('twinkling')

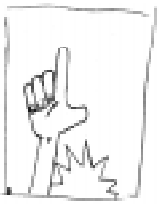


This is how you say 'I agree' or 'I think that's a good idea'. This is a quiet, easy way of letting everyone know, especially the facilitator, what you think.

Moving your hands up or down

This is how you ask someone to speak louder or softer.

The L-sign



Making this sign shows that there are language or translation problems. Sometimes this means that you are asking someone to talk slower, and sometimes you are asking for translation.

The time-out sign

With this gesture you ask for the opportunity to make a technical remark (such as to suggest the meeting takes a break, or to make an important announcement or suggestion). Obviously, nobody should misuse the time-out sign to gain priority over other speakers or to change the subject.

Fist in the air

By doing this you are saying 'This is unacceptable.'

Circling your hands

When people talk too long, you can circle with your hands in the air to ask them to finish off what they are saying.

Wiggling your fingers in front of your face

With this gesture you are showing that you don't follow the discussion anymore, and that another explanation is necessary. It can also mean that you are dizzy from too many details.

Problems in meetings

Communication between people is important;. With poor communication, group cooperation can easily and unnecessarily go wrong. Most communication that is important to the organisation takes place during meetings. What follows here is a list of the most common and easy-to-prevent problems.

Talking for the sake of it: talking too long, too often and too loud, often without anything important to say, just for the sake of being heard.

Defensive behaviour: constantly reacting to points that contradict your own opinion. This often goes hand in hand with taking criticism personally.

Splitting hairs: highlighting the weak points of someone else's argument and presenting this as an important point, in order to draw attention from that person's main argument.

Repetition: unnecessarily repeating what has already been said (more than once).

Human shield: when someone receives criticism, somebody else verbally jumps in to play a human shield. The result of this is often that the person at whom the criticism is directed doesn't have the chance or the responsibility to explain him or herself.

Nuisance behaviour: interrupting a discussion without cause and starting a discussion on a new topic.

Negativity: seeing the negative side of everything being addressed.

Tooting your own horn: using your contribution to redirect the discussion so that your pet subject is always discussed.

Paternalism and discrimination: not taking people seriously because they are young, for example, or inexperienced. Paternalism and discrimination can also mean discounting others' opinions on the basis of class, physical ability, race, ethnicity, or other social categories.

Taking over: monopolising initiatives without giving others the chance to take on responsibility.

Selective deafness: only hearing the arguments that are up your alley.

Talking on behalf of others: hiding behind other people by saying, for example, 'I heard that...' or 'a lot of people think that...'

Sexism within direct-democratic organisations manifests itself, for example, in the form of not taking women's contributions seriously. These contributions can include political analyses or technical advice, fields that are stereotypically seen as specialties particular to men. There are many other forms of discrimination within direct-democratic groups besides sexism, which also need to be dealt with.

6. Setting up your own organisation

Organising a direct-democratic group is quite a job. Direct democracy aims to organise in such a way that involves people as much as possible in making the decisions that are relevant to their lives; that is mostly what direct democracy should be about. In this last chapter, you can find a number of pointers that can help you when you set up your own direct-democratic organisation.

The initiative group

The chance that all sorts of people just happen to have the same idea at the same moment, in the same place, to set up a direct-democratic group, is obviously really small. Practice has shown that setting up organisations, whether they are direct-democratic organisations or not, usually happens as a result of the initiative of a few persistent people. Starting up a sustainable organisation is something that demands good preparation and perseverance.

In order to increase the success of your initiative, it's a good idea, first of all, to get an initiative group together that will get things started. You can do this in a number of ways. The most obvious thing to do is to ask around in your circle of friends. If this doesn't result in the necessary enthusiasm, don't get disheartened. Then it's time to look beyond your friends. A tried and true method of finding potential members for initiative groups is to organise a public meeting. You should organise this meeting around a theme that, in your opinion, is important and connected to the group which will be set up.

Such a meeting's success depends on a number of factors. These are the most important:

a) Make sure the programme content is good
b) You can increase the turn-out for the meeting by making a connection with current affairs which already have media attention
c) Announce the meeting as widely as possible. It's pointless making a good programme if nobody turns up because they don't know about it. Make posters, spread flyers and send press releases
d) Ensure that you make a clear flyer that informs people about your initiative to set up an organisation and encourages them to take part
e) Make a list of all people present. Moments when so many potential comrades are alltogether in one room are scarce, and there's nothing more annoying after the meeting than not knowing who was present. Make a list and let it do the rounds so that people can write down their name and (e-mail) address if they want to be kept informed.

Finally, make sure that you know what you want to achieve by the end of the meeting, and already think of what the next step can be.

The goal

Sometimes, the goal is immediately apparent; other times it is the subject of debate. In any case, having a clear goal (or goals) is a requirement for the success of the collaboration. However, setting a clear goal is not something that happens just like that. Activists sometimes confuse their methods and their goals, so that carrying out actions becomes a goal in itself.

Permanent organisations, such as collectives and federations, have different goals. You could say that they have roughly three different types of goals: short-term goals, intermediate steps, and long-term goals. A long-term goal of a federation, for example, could be uniting all food-producing factories in the region. An intermediate step could be uniting these factories at local level, and the short-term goal could be informing people about what a federation is. You start by defining your ultimate goal. Then, you define the path and the initial and intermediate steps necessary to reach that goal. Don't lose sight of the ultimate goal, and don't let yourself get caught up in political games and media hype.

The target group

The next step in setting up your organisation is establishing your target group. Make a list of the groups you want to reach. You will often have different target groups at the same time, and it pays to approach these groups with different methods of communication and action. Before you decide which methods to use in order to reach your target groups, make sure you choose a suitable organisational structure.

The form of organisation

In chapter 4 we discussed the most important organisational forms. Besides temporary and permanent organisational forms, you can choose between formal and informal means of organising. Which organisational form is most suitable depends on your goal, the participants in the initiative, and the circumstances in which you will have to work. Changing your organisational structure afterwards can be difficult, so consider well before you make your choice.

The methods

Your choice of methods also largely depends on your goal, the participants in your initiative, and the circumstances in which you will have to work. For example, if your goal is to temporarily put a company out of business, your method of choice could be an occupation. On another occasion, the goal could be to inform people about an issue. In that case, spreading flyers or organising a demonstration could be a suitable method. In a final example, if the group's goal is to start up a social and political centre, one possible method could be to squat a building. Choosing the right action method can be a difficult question and often involves consideration of all sorts of possibilities. Choose carefully, because you don't want the method to overshadow the reason for the action.

Practical points

When you've got your action group together, and you've agreed on your organisational structure, your goals, your target group, and your methods, then the framework has been laid for cooperation. Here are some tips of a practical nature:

-Ensure that there is a clear contact point that people can refer to for further information, and announce this on all flyers, posters, press releases and other publications. Don't forget things like your website address, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses.
-Make reports of all meetings and gatherings, and keep all this information in a central place that is accessible to all members of your group. There is nothing as frustrating as constantly having to run around, looking for essential information.
-Make a good public-relations plan that can be referred to any time you publicise your activities. Such a plan should include press contacts' fax and phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and media deadlines, as well as places that you can put up posters and distribute leaflets.
-Make a list of individuals and organisations that might be able to help organise and support your activities.

When you are still in the orientation phase, it's often worth the effort to contact existing organisations and find out how they work. You can profit from their knowledge and experience. This way you avoid making unnecessary mistakes, and you don't have to reinvent the wheel time and again.

Good luck, and have fun!

Resources

Organising and discussion methods:

Anarchism in Action: Methods, Tactics, Skills and Ideas
http://www.radio4all.org/aia/
(A detailed handbook about direct democracy, anarchism as an organisational method and anarchist projects.)
-On the EYFA (a European network of horizontal, social and ecological organisations) website, you can find a lot of different pamphlets about meeting techniques.
http://www.eyfa.org/resources.htm
-On Conflict and Consensus, A Handbook on Formal Consensus Decision Making
http://www.consensus.net

Anarchist Resources on the Internet

The Anarchist Organisation (http://www.tao.ca)
Infoshop (http://www.infoshop.org)
Anarchist Infos (http://www.a-infos.org)
The Independent Media Center (http://www.indymedia.org)
The Memory Hole, (http://www.blancmange.net/tmh/tmhframe.html)

Postscript

Practice starts where this booklet ends. The practicalities of organising, such as your choice of goals and the methods you choose to achieve your goals, were not discussed in great depth in this introduction to direct-democratic organisation. By reading this booklet, you have been able to familiarise yourself with a number of traditions and rules of direct-democratic organisation, which the undersigned has put together on the basis of his own experience. The choice of information in this booklet is quite selective considering the wealth of evaluations and pamphlets that circulate within the western movement for direct democracy. This booklet is not law and the jargon used can also be challenged.

The purpose of this booklet is to make clear that there is a reasonable alternative to hierarchical organisations, and that horizontal organisations definitely don't have to be chaotic or small scale. There is a rich tradition behind the direct-democratic ideal, but more importantly than that, a resplendent future. It is up to you what form this future will take.

Marco van Duijn, Leiden, Summer 2003

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